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Bank Buildings and Representation Phenomenon Selection of the Work of Michal Milan Harminc, Doyen of Slovak Architecture

Jana Pohaničová^{a,*}, Katarína Števlíková^a

^a Faculty of Architecture, Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Námetie Slobody 19, 812 45 Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract

From the point of view of Slovak and Central-European architectural historiography, the issue of architecture of bank buildings in the era of subsiding historicism and ascending modernism has not been researched thoroughly yet. An interesting contribution to this field of architecture is presented by the work of Michal Milan Harminc (1869 - 1864), the doyen of Slovak architecture. His life and work have been the focus of a long term biographical, archival and field research of both authors. Almost 300 architectural works, created 1887 – 1951 in the region of the former Austria-Hungary, later in Czechoslovakia and other successional states (Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Ukraine), ranked Harminc to the most productive Central-European architects. Financial institutions present a significant component of his typologically as well as stylishly diverse architectural portfolio. Among his works are included main as well as branch offices of major Slovak institutions ranging from first significant establishments based entirely on Slovak capital/fund to buildings of Tatra banka, which, before the WWII, had ambition to become a central Slovak bank promoting Slovak industry and interests of national-emancipatory movement. By the 1920's, buildings rendered by excellent eclectic architect Harminc gained a monumental character. Representative and solid nature of the architecture of first Slovak bank institutions was expressed by modulation of their façades as well as solid interiors. Harminc proved himself to be a versatile author possessing the sense of adequacy of architectural forms as well as logic of disposition, whether creating in rural or in urban environment. These features were significant for first two creative periods of Harminc's work, emerging from historicism to the position of modern official monumentality.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +421 2 572 76 358.

E-mail address: pohanicova@fa.stuba.sk

In terms of formation of specific typology, architect's work reflects reliably the period conception of representative concept of banking palace, adapted by author for the Slovak peripheral environment. To express the character of particular financial institutions, author employs formal elements referring to classical line of historic architecture and decorative elements adherent to banking operations, such as beehives, the figures of Mercury, Cronus or Industry, fruit, flower and laurel festoons. In the area of Central-Europe, this typological line is represented by bank buildings of Ignác Alpár, Otto Wagner and others. In comparison to the works of these architects, bank buildings of Harminc represent less imposing, regionally bound mode of architecture. Nevertheless, it constitutes an integral component of diversity of Slovak as well as European cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

Central-European historiography of architecture of the long century offers a wide range of extraordinary personalities. From the point of view of Slovak architectural historiography, a major contribution to the period discourse is presented by the work of architect Michal Milan Harminc (1869, Kulpín, Serbia – 1964, Bratislava, Slovakia). His wider and often overlooked European format has been reflected only in the context of recent research. The exceptionality of the doyen of Slovak architecture lays mainly in the richness of his stylishly as well as typologically varied opus. During his 64 years long architectural career in the wide region of Central- and Eastern-Europe, Harminc's style expression changed twice to reflect up-to-date trends. In the multitude of realised works of the pragmatic eclectic Harminc a defile of relevant stylish positions is represented, including historicism, romantic reminiscences of medieval styles, references to art nouveau and folk inspirations and monumental conception of modernism and functionalism. Changes in his expression are reflected in architecture of first bank buildings based on Slovak capital in the territory of today's Slovakia, as well. By these realisations, Harminc presented himself not just as an architect of Slovak origin concerned with the question of national emancipation (which must have been an important criterion for acquiring these commissions), but above all as an apt architect combining the pragmatic disposition with adequately representative forms adapted to provincial environment. His designs for country banks and concept of urban banking palace represent an important contribution to varied mosaic of European architecture.

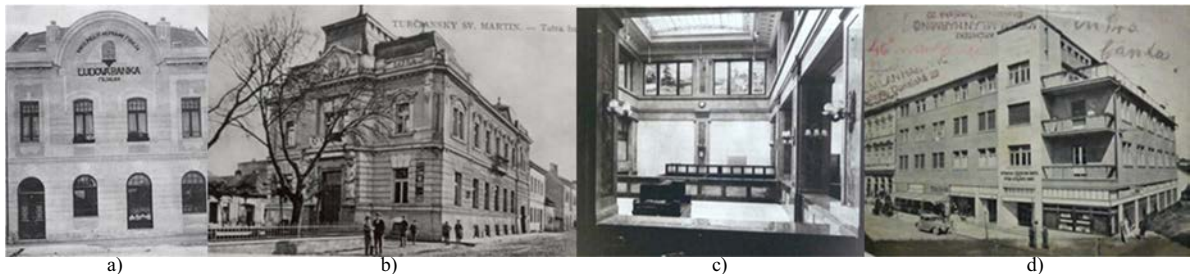


Fig. 1. (a) Building of Vrbové bank; (b) Martin, Building of Tatra bank; (c) Bratislava, interior of Tatra bank building; (d) Nitra, Building of Všeobecná nitrianska bank.

2. The Eclectic Harminc

Concerning the changes of the view of architecture during Harminc's creative career, oscillating between historicism, modernism and functionalism, his work is characterised by three independent periods: The Budapest period, associated with the heritage of historical styles; so called period of official monumentality, reflecting rising modernism in a unique way; and the functionalist period, concluding the work of the pragmatic eclectic (Toran, 1962).

Since the beginning of Harminc's building activities in the territory of today's Slovakia, the bank buildings had been an integral part of Harminc's portfolio. They presented an interesting challenge for the eclectic author, who proved himself to be foresightful businessman disposing with important contacts within national-emancipatory movement as well as in Slovak financial elite circle.

Banking in Slovakia had national and peripheral character (Holec and Hallon, 2007). Taking into consideration its relative separateness, Slovak banking reached its peak during the first decade of 20th century, while the rest of the

Austria-Hungary experienced an economic crisis. Its character was influenced significantly by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, which led to the concentration of both economical and industrial activities to Budapest on the one hand, and on the other hand, by the aggressive character of Hungarian economic nationalism, disadvantaging non-Hungarian enterprises. As a result, in 1860's, representatives of Slovak national-emancipatory movement began to realise the political power of the finance. However, systematic coinciding of both political and economic interests in the programme of Slovak national-emancipatory movement had been present only since 1890's (Holec and Hallon, 2007).

Among the first financial institutions based on Slovak capital was the Ružomberský účastinársky úverný spolok established in 1879. Harminc realised the buildings both of its head office (Ružomberok 1901-1902) and of the branch office (Trstená 1906). These, among others, represent the line of subsiding, however still relevant, historicism and aborning modernism, [3]. To this line of Harminc's architectural production belong also bank buildings in Nové Mesto nad Váhom (Ľudová banka, účastinná spoločnosť, 1904 – 1906) and its branch in Vrbové (1906), Hospodárska banka in Trnava (1913 – 1914), Tatra banka in Martin (1910 – 1912) and its branch in Bytča (1920 – 1921), even though the latter was built after the WWI. Early Harminc's bank buildings in the region of today's Slovakia illustrate several noteworthy moments of formation of creative creed of the architect. First of all, it is the representation phenomenon in relation to specific building type - the banking palace and its modifications. To communicate the buildings' purpose, Harminc used the motives commonly associated with banking. For the local savings banks, the most common was the beehive, referring to the middle-class virtue of economy. Among other motives, applied for bank buildings by such Austro-Hungarian architects as Ignác Alpár, József Hubert or Ödön Lechner, Harminc decorated the façades of these local institutions by the flower and fruit garlands or figures of chubby children, referring to prosperity, a head of an elderly man we identified with Cronus, as the profit in banking has always been linked with time, and laurel leaves referring to success. It is characterized by utility of disposition and adequately representative forms moulding prestige and image of institution standing at the beginning of opinion change on a specific building type. The neo-baroque forms of the façades enriched by art nouveau motives, as well as the simple and logically composed disposition and spatial concept of his buildings became a base of one of substantial stylish lines of Harminc's work. During the times of reinforced Magyarization at the beginning of the 20th century, Harminc succeeded in creating the Slovak provincial bank building prototype demonstrating the endeavour to raise the Slovak public in terms of national awareness as well as economy, [5].

Harminc's search of adequate architectural statement culminated in the monumental design of Tatra banka palace in Martin. The importance of the institution with ambition to become a Slovak central national bank, promoting Slovak enterprises and supporting bank institution based on Slovak capital required representative architectural forms, which could compete with the architectural forms of the central state institution – the Austro-Hungarian Bank (Števlíková, 2015). As means to achieve it, dominant position of the two-storied building within the main square, monumental concept of the façade gradating to the centre, over-life-size sculptures of Mercury and Industry following the example of great banks in Budapest and Vienna, as well as glass roofed banking hall in the centre of disposition, showcasing the modern technology such as advanced heating system, electric lighting or lift were used. The representative staircase creating access to the banking hall elevated above the level of the street, as well as attention paid to the light conditions of employees reflect the period architectural discourse [1] and the position of the institution within the Slovak banking structure as a key institution for the formation of the independent Slovak financial sector [4]. Harminc's second creative period is associated with his key realisations which resonated in broader European context, as well. One of the best examples of the banking palace in the context of interwar period Slovakia is the headquarters of the Tatra banka in Bratislava (1922 – 1925). The concept of modern official monumentality coincides with the solidity, importance and success of the institution, which were expressed by its architecture. At the same time, it is one of the most impressing Harminc's buildings as far as interior is considered.

Harminc's sense of utility of disposition in conjunction with representative, however functionalist, form of banking palace enhanced by the refinement of materials is manifested in the design for the Nitrianska všeobecná banka in Nitra (1932 – 1933). Under the influence of the young architect Ferdinand Silberstein, Harminc definitely turned from architecture of historicism and created new form of modern bank building featured by its urban character, [6].

All examples of Harminc's banks stated above document a symptomatic feature of his creative approach – the adequacy of selection of style for the building, considering its typological sort and representation needs. The same can

be observed on architect's other realisations, such as residential, public and sacral buildings, reflecting modifications of architectural opinion from historicism to modernism and functionalism in a unique "Harmic-like" way.

3. Results and Discussions

There have been several attempts to evaluate the work of perhaps most productive Slovak architect. Nevertheless, the stylishly as well as typologically varied opus of M. M. Harminc still offers many opportunities for more detailed research. In the synthetic works of Hungarian as well as Serbian colleagues there was not enough attention paid to the issue of Harminc and his bank buildings, [2, 7]. In the domestic literature, the attention was unjustly focused on functionalist and modernistic phases of his work. Except for the non-complex knowledge of the first period of author's work, this opinion was supported mainly by the fact, that the works of monumental modernism are particularly remarkable and reflect the creative potential of the architect of European format, [9]. The grant research of both authors (2012-2016) has been focused on so far overlooked first period of Harminc's work, so called Budapest period. This phase was characterized by taking the inspiration from the styles of the past. On the basis of Toran's [9] periodization into Budapest period, monumental modernism period and functionalist period, we consider it appropriate to emphasize the Budapest period as a key for the formation of space and mass conception of the architect oscillating between historicism and modernism. This has been demonstrated on examples of bank buildings based on Slovak capital, which have been examined in wider Central-European context. In these relations we consider the doyen of Slovak architecture to be a significant personality of Central-European architectural scene.

4. Conclusions

The research focused on the bank buildings of M.M. Harminc brought unique findings not just about his edifices, but also helped to unveil the contexts of wider architectural relations in the region of Central-Europe. It has been proved on chosen examples, that the Budapest period should be viewed as equal to the later periods of his work in the matter of quality, as well as a solid basis for his later modern, sublime, representative and monumental forms of architecture. Another interesting cognition is that the models of the past did not prevent the architect from identifying with modern trends. Mapping of the Harminc's legacy presents an important contribution to the architectural historiography of Central-Europe, extending the knowledge of extraordinary personalities of architectural scene of foregone centuries as a part of Slovak as well as European cultural heritage.

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